

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Irving Kristol

The man who put 'neo' into conservatism.

Updated Sept. 19, 2009 12:01 a.m. ET

Perhaps the greatest gift of the gifted Irving Kristol, who died yesterday at 89, was prescience. This does not mean predicting the future. Prescience, a more useful gift, is seeing the direction in which the future is headed.

In his early years, Kristol saw that the Marxism which fascinated him and many others at mid-century had no future, and he embraced the ideals of the West, holding them tight for a lifetime. Later as a Democrat, he saw that many of the social welfare policies of the 1960s would fail, and so he undertook a long, unsparing critique of his own party's most cherished ideas. Later still, as a Republican, Kristol realized that his party's economic ideas were moribund, and he turned his energies to leading the pro-growth, "supply-side" revolution that culminated in the historic Reagan Presidency.

Irving Kristol is most often credited with leading the movement in American politics that came to be called neoconservatism. Begun in the 1970s, it may be counted as a testament to its enduring strength that as recently as the administration of George W. Bush, critics were bursting blood vessels screaming, again, that the government had fallen into the hands of "the neocons." Nothing more made Irving break into his familiar wide smile than the intensity of his opposition.

The tension between neoconservatism and its critics still lies at the heart of our political division today, or much of it. Irving Kristol was a monthly contributor to these pages for some 25 years, beginning in the early 1970s at the invitation of then editorial page editor Bob Bartley.

It was through this period, both as a contributor to the Journal Editorial Page and as the editor of The Public Interest magazine, that Kristol developed his critique of the welfare state, the often illiberal ambitions of liberal social science, and the Democratic Party's steady drift to the left. (See excerpts from those columns nearby.)

In late July 1998, he wrote a piece for the Journal titled "Politics Reaches an Endpoint." In it he described the evolution of the Democratic Party into what it remains today. In typical fashion, Kristol made his argument by looking for a counterintuitive truth. Here, it was that George McGovern had "won" the 1972 election:

"He did not win the White House but he won the Democratic Party. Again, it was his nomination that was the crucial event, not the election. His nomination meant that the left-liberal wing of the Democratic Party had finally seized control, ousting the more 'centrist' wing that had its base mainly in the South and West. Can anyone imagine Lyndon Johnson being terribly concerned about discrimination against homosexuals in the military, fighting tooth and nail against tax cuts or vetoing legislation limiting late-term abortions?"

The Kristol critique helped shape the basis for many opposition ideas to the modern political left, in both domestic and foreign policy. American politics rarely bends for long to the ideas of one person, a modest truth that Irving Kristol understood. So it should be noted that he enlisted a small army of similarly minded intellectuals ("like-minded" would be an oxymoron among this crowd) to carry the fight.

From his editor's perch at the monthly Public Interest, beginning in 1965, he sent forward an unceasing barrage of ideas from the pens of writers. A short list would include: magazine cofounder Daniel Bell, Nathan Glazer, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Charles Murray, Thomas Sowell, James Q. Wilson, Glenn Loury, Abigail Thernstrom, Michael Novak, Aaron Wildavsky, Samuel Huntington, Seymour Martin Lipset, James C. Coleman, Edward Banfield, Chester Finn, Alfred Kahn, Leon Kass, Brigitte Berger, William Bennett, Diane Ravitch. And hundreds of others.

To the extent that American politics today consists of two sides—one insisting that the state guide the country forward, the other that the private economy drive the country forward—it is in large part Irving Kristol and his thinkers who defined the order of battle.

Where the next turn in history lies is beside the point. Irving Kristol's life and career are a compass for anyone who wants to know how ideas and honest inquiry can shape American politics.

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